

## 12.

Reverdy Harper's first session had gone perfectly. Watching him squirm in his chair for nearly twenty minutes while she and Alex just sat there, staring at him, was worth all the discomfort of getting her clothes completely soaked. The man was a complete prick. There was no way around it. He was a class of prick that Amelia knew existed but had never encountered before. Almost every one of the white, male, able-bodied managers, directors, and CEOs she'd worked with had exhibited some version of Reverdy Harper's personality traits, but none of them were as wealthy, as entitled, or as clueless about how their wealth and entitlement operated in their lives. Putting the screws to Reverdy was so pleasurable that she almost didn't care whether he actually learned anything from their sessions. It was enough to watch him flailing beneath the imaginary heel of her metaphorical boot.

But to actually change him—that was a goal that called on Amelia's better self. She doubted whether it could be done. His sense of privilege was deeply entrenched, pounded into him like railroad ties into the ground. She was going to try, though. And she was going to enjoy herself along the way.

“Are you going to be okay getting home?” Alex asked. They had just entered the elevator and were, for the moment, alone.

“Yesh,” Amelia said, “it ishn'th thath chold outh todhay. Andh I have a choat in my bagh.”

“Do you need help getting it out and putting it on?”

The solicitude surprised her. She glanced up at him. He'd foregone the baseball cap today. His forehead somehow looked a little more red than usual, but that might have been her imagination.

"I wouldh likhe thath," she said, "once we're outh of the elevathor."

The elevator stopped. The door opened on two men, in nearly matching suits, mid-conversation. On seeing Amelia, their talk stopped suddenly. They glanced at each other, and then back at Amelia. Seeing Alex smirk out of the corner of her eye, Amelia felt relief. This was typical behavior for him. Maybe whatever had been going on with the baseball cap really was just a flicker.

The elevator doors started closing. One of the men reached out, passing his hand between them, causing them to retract. He boarded the elevator, followed by his friend. As the door closed, Amelia looked up at the backs of their necks. One of them was tinged pink, and covered with a moist sheen. The silence was palpable. When the elevator arrived at the ground floor, both men exited at a clip.

"Your reshtrainth is remarkhable," Amelia said to Alex as she rolled off the elevator.

"What do you think they'll talk about later? How people in wheelchairs shouldn't be allowed to drink water in public?"

"They won'th talkh about hith. They've already forghotthen all about hith."

"You're probably right."

They passed the security gates. The guard nodded and waved at Amelia. "Those guys upstairs treating you OK?" he asked.

Absolutely not, Amelia said. They were being relentlessly mean to her.

“Figured as much,” he said. “But you can take it, I bet. Have a good day, now.”

Outside, Amelia asked Alex how his search was going.

“Slowly,” he said. “It’s a lot of data to sort through. Of course, it might make things go faster if I knew why I was looking for the things I’m looking for. My current methods might not be the best ones for the task.”

“Your methods have always worked fine in the past.”

“Because I understood the goal. And the reasoning behind it. Absent those things, I’m left to grope in the dark. I am glad you changed your mind about the kind of work we’re doing for the bank, but it doesn’t do either of us any good if I don’t have all the information I need. It’s not at all clear to me how gathering information about a recently-purchased building gets us to our usual target. I’m perfectly happy to work new and different angles, but I need to know the rationale.”

Amelia had shared nothing of her personal life with Alex. He knew the broad strokes: where she lived, her arrangement with her tenants, how she’d come into her work as a disability consultant. He also knew how she used her share of their profits. It was part of the reason he’d agreed to participate. But they did not discuss any romantic aspects of their lives. He didn’t know about Salih, how she’d fallen in love with him, or what had happened to Salih’s family. Love, Amelia suspected, was in the same category as luck for Alex: an irrational concept, a misguided notion, an obnoxious variable in the human decision-making process. If she told him that she was asking him to compromise a major financial institution in order to mend her own broken heart—well, she wasn’t sure what he would do, nor did she want to find out.

Amelia looked up at Alex's forehead. It hadn't been her imagination—there was a reddish patch, covering the space above his eyebrows. Like a sunburn. Except it wasn't a sunburn. It was too localized for that. Something had been there, and then wiped away.

“You're noth wearing your new hath todhay,” Amelia said.

Alex looked startled, but only for a moment. “I didn't feel like it today.”

This did not deserve a response, Amelia thought. She asked him if he would please get her coat out of her backpack for her now. He walked around behind her chair and unzipped the bag.

“You're not going to answer me, are you?” he said.

“What wash on your foreheadh yeshterday?”

She felt Alex pull the coat out of her backpack.

“This is a nice jacket,” he said. “Fleece appears to be very much in style lately.”

Amelia leaned forward. Alex helped her get one arm into the coat, and then the other.

“Okay?” he asked.

“Ziph me uph, pleashe.”

He came around front and closed her zipper. “Okay?”

“Yesh.”

“So . . . what's on your agenda for the rest of the day?”

This question did not make any sense, coming from Alex. Was this his way of kicking up sand? “I have an appointhment,” Amelia said.

“A doctor appointment?”

“Physhichal theraphy.”

“Oh. Is that something you do regularly?”

Once a week, Amelia explained, although occasionally she went twice, as she was doing now, when she experienced an unusual amount of pain.

“Ah.”

It was strange to get into this with Alex, even in such a superficial way. Amelia waited to see if there were any more surprises coming.

“Well,” he said. “I guess I will see you for Mr. Harper’s next session on . . .”

“Mondhay.”

“Right, Monday.”

“Unlessh you have shomething for me shooner, righth?”

“Right.” Alex nodded curtly before abruptly turning and crossing the street. Amelia watched him go. There were so many blanks left in their conversation. For now, Amelia decided, it was better not to try filling them.

#

“Pain scale?”

Amelia was on her stomach, with her arm held somewhere behind her back. Janelle was putting pressure on her elbow, the result of which was a glorious opening sensation in her shoulder. Which demonstrated yet another problem with the pain scale: some pain actually felt good.

“Thwelve,” Amelia said.

“The highest is ten.”

Amelia did not understand how a person could have no sense of humor whatsoever.

“Eighth,” she said.

Janelle pressed a little lighter.

“No, no, no!” Amelia cried. “Don’t shtop pushing!”

“Eight is a little too high. We want to be closer to five.”

“Then I meanth three!”

Janelle ignored her. Amelia’s shoulder despaired. It had been bothering her more than usual lately. Amelia had caught herself slumping to one side in her chair, and she suspected she was pressing on something more than she used to. The tension had begun working its way into her neck. Whatever Janelle had been doing, it felt really, really good.

But now Janelle was letting Amelia’s arm drop back to the table. She walked around the table, lifted Amelia’s other arm, and gently moved it around behind Amelia’s back, mirroring what she’d just done. “Pain scale?”

“Zhero,” Amelia said.

“Seriously, now.”

“One.”

Janelle pushed harder. This shoulder didn’t bother Amelia as much as the other one. The opening, spreading sensation did not induce quite the same euphoria.

“How about now?” Janelle asked.

“Five.”

Apparently satisfied, Janelle released Amelia’s arm. She moved around the table until she was standing near Amelia’s head. Then she slid her hands along the back of Amelia’s skull until

she was cradling her head in her palms, and gently pressed her fingers into the base of Amelia's skull.

Janelle had never done this before. It was completely new to Amelia. Without intending to, she let her head sink back into Janelle's hands. Every muscle in her back relaxed. She had a vision of her spine opening up lengthwise, like a narrow book, exposing ancient, dusty pages. Amelia's eyes welled up, for reasons she did not understand.

"That thing you're protecting," Janelle said. "We felt it the other day. You don't have to protect it."

"Thish ishn't whath I phay you forh," Amelia said.

"Maybe not," Janelle said, "but it's what's happening for you today." The pressure from Janelle's fingers increased, ever so slightly. Amelia's head tipped back farther. The opening sensation spread from her spine to her pelvis. She knew exactly what she was protecting, and letting it out was not an option.

"I don'th want to dishchussh thish with you."

"You don't have to. But that pain you've got in your shoulders? It's not because of how you're sitting in your chair. It's because of *this*, whatever it is."

*This*. If Amelia let *this* out, if she dropped the walls, she wouldn't be able to do her job. She wouldn't be able to take on Reverdy Harper, or extract from Pacific Bank & Trust the things she needed to get Salih back. Whatever Janelle was doing with her fingers, Amelia needed it to stop right now.

Except the words wouldn't come. Along with the strange unfurling in her hips and her back was an expansive feeling in her skull. Blood was flowing into new, thirsty places, to

neglected cells and forgotten nerves. She felt as though Janelle was guiding her head down and down into a place it hadn't ever been but longed to go.

“You can keep holding on if you want to,” Janelle was saying, from some other place, “but I don't think it's helping you.”

Amelia saw Khalid's back door again, broken, hanging on its hinges. She saw the darkness inside, the hint of the spaces that once contained Salih, but never would again. She saw the front of Zaid's, now boarded up, with the notice that it would soon be the latest, newest branch of Pacific Bank & Trust. She heard a deep, wrenching sob from somewhere.

“There you go,” Janelle said.

“Shuth uph,” Amelia said, as soon as she could breathe, but it was no use now. A seam in the steel walls had failed. They were giving way. Amelia was furious with Janelle for allowing this to happen, for bringing her into a place where she couldn't help but bump into things she couldn't afford to touch.

“I accept your anger—” Janelle began.

“Wondherful.”

“—but what I just released in you was right on the surface. All that heartbreak. You only think you've got it all hidden away.”

#

Amelia decided against the bus, preferring instead to clear her mind by following the sidewalk home. She really ought to follow through on her impulse to report Janelle to whatever governing board there was for physical therapists. What just happened had to be some kind of official

violation, some sort of breach of ethics. Amelia had not consented to—to whatever it was Janelle had done to her.

And what had she done? She'd poked her fingers into a private place, the carefully guarded box where Amelia kept her feelings for Salih, the ones that she couldn't afford to have floating about, storming down on her, exploding inside her without warning. Amelia had pushed that box down deep, and Janelle had no right to go there.

But that was just it; Janelle hadn't gone anywhere deep. The place she'd poked her fingers was only the back of Amelia's neck, and everything had come tumbling out, after only a moment's pressure. All that pain, it wasn't hidden at all. If Janelle could get to it, then it was all just sitting there on the surface, just like she'd said, floating like an oil slick. Visible to anyone who looked for more than a second or two, anyone who was even the slightest bit perceptive.

Like Alex, for example.

Alex. How much longer was she going to keep him in the dark about what she wanted from Pacific Bank & Trust? How much longer was *he* going to pretend that he wasn't tipping over, mentally speaking? If either of them was going to come clean, it was going to be her. And if everything she thought she'd been hiding so well was really just sitting right beneath her skin, she'd better do it soon.

As Amelia turned on to her block and approached her home, she realized the urge to report Janelle to the relevant authorities had left her. In its place was a begrudging gratitude for what Janelle had done that afternoon. Maybe Amelia would have come to this realization on her own, but it was better to have arrived now. For that, she supposed, she should be thankful. She rolled up the ramp to the front door, scanned her fob, and went inside.

There was a rush and tumble of footsteps on the stairs. They moved over Amelia's head and downward. Their owner was Brian, looking wide-eyed and frantic.

"Amelia! Do you have a minute? Like, right now?"

Anything in Brian's world that could cause him to act this way could not actually be that big a deal. Amelia invited him in. As soon as the door was closed, he ran over to the living room window and peeked through the blinds at the street in front of the building. Then he turned to Amelia.

"This is—uh, this might seem like a random question, but—oh, jeez—"

He threw himself down on the couch. Amelia told him to take a deep breath. He put his hands on his knees, closed his eyes, and inhaled. He let his breath out slowly, and opened his eyes.

"Was—was Salih, like . . . was he *into* anything?"

Amelia was shocked. Could Brian possibly be asking about Salih's sexual proclivities?

"Whath on earth dho you mean?"

"Like, political stuff. Activism. Groups. Stuff like that."

"Groupsh?"

Brian groaned and ran his hands through his dark curls. "Is there any chance he was . . . you know . . . a . . ."

Amelia begged him to get to the point.

"A terrorist."

"*Whath?*"

Brian put up his hands. “I know, I know. It’s crazy. But something happened today, and I—I just have to be sure. I just have to ask.”

When Zaid’s Falafel closed, Brian had asked Amelia if she knew why. She’d told him that Salih’s family had received an offer on the building, things had moved quickly, Khalid decided to retire, and he bought a new home somewhere in the North Bay. This much of the story was true. She had said nothing to Brian about Salih going into hiding. As far as Brian knew, the reason Salih wasn’t around as much was because he’d had to get a job closer to his new home, and the letters were nothing more than a romantic game.

But Brian was so worked up right now that Amelia had to wonder what he’d heard, what he knew.

“Whath happenedh todhay?” she asked.

Brian glanced over at the window again. Then he leaned forward. “There was a car parked outside our building today,” he whispered, “a big black car, like in the movies. With people in it. They were parked there all morning. And most of the afternoon.”

Parking was scarce in the neighborhood, Amelia said. Some people left their car for days and moved it only for street cleaning.

“No, they were *sitting in it* all day. Except this one time when one of them got out and then came back. With lunch. And then again, a little while ago, for a coffee run.”

“Sho?”

“They were *watching the house*. They only left just now, after you came home.”

“Seemsh likhe a coinshidensh,” Amelia said.

“No. They’re definitely coming back.”

“How do you know?”

“They got the city to save their parking space.” David pointed out the window, as if Amelia could see the offending spot from where she was sitting. “It’s got barricades and no-parking signs.”

These things, Amelia said, did not add up to a conspiracy. Brian ran his hand through his hair again. “Didn’t Salih build you a new battery thing for your wheelchair?” he asked.

“Yesh,” Amelia said.

“So he was good at stuff like that. Working on things with batteries and wires.”

Now Amelia was angry. Being a skilled engineer from Iraq, she said, did not make someone a terrorist. Which was something Brian ought to know.

“You’re right, you’re right,” he said, “I didn’t mean to—oh god. Oh god.”

Brian hid his face in his hands. Amelia asked him why on earth he was so distraught over things that, in all likelihood, had absolutely nothing to do with each other.

“You’re right, you’re right. I’m overreacting.” He stood up suddenly. “I didn’t mean to freak you out or anything. I’m sorry. I’ll see you in a little while. It’s me coming down tonight.”

He turned to go. Then he froze, pointing at her desk.

“Is that for Salih?” he asked.

The envelope containing Amelia’s response to Salih’s last letter was on her desk. She hadn’t yet written his name on it. She’d meant to do it last night, but she was too tired to use her pen, and didn’t have time to do it before leaving the house that morning.

“Yesh,” Amelia said, “I’m going to put it out in just a bith.”

“Okay,” Brian said. Then he left.

Amelia was baffled. Brian was often charmingly baffled by things that didn't have an obvious explanation, but he rarely got worked up about them. His lack of anxiety was one of the things she appreciated about him. What was it about a car being parked across the street for a whole day that could get his underwear all twisted like this? She went over to the window and raised the blinds. Just as Brian had said, there were now two white and orange-striped barricades there, each with a no-parking sign attached. But this was not really all that unusual. The space was probably blocked off for a Pacific Gas & Electric repair truck, and Brian's big black government car—if it actually existed—had just been squatting there for the day.

But then a car pulled up next to the parking spot. A black car. A woman got out of the passenger side, moved the barricades to the sidewalk, and walked off down the street. The car sidled into the parking space. Amelia couldn't see the driver, but then the driver's side window rolled down, and she and the driver locked eyes.

Amelia felt a jolt of electricity. The driver was male, with a wide, square face. He looked at her as if he knew her. Did he? Did *she* know *him*?

The man turned to fiddle with something in the car. Amelia backed away from the window, taking up an angle where she could watch without being seen—or so she hoped. A few minutes later, the woman returned, holding a McDonald's bag and a cardboard beverage holder with two cups. She handed the bag to the wide-faced man through the passenger window, opened the door, and got back in the car. The man glanced one more time at Amelia's window before unwrapping a hamburger and eating half of it in one bite.

Amelia looked over at the letter to Salih, sitting on her desk, thinking about Brian's suggestion that she hold off on sending it. She usually left the letters on the front porch, behind

the row of potted plants, which Frances maintained religiously. As with the deliveries, Amelia did not know who picked the letters up, or how they got to Salih. The entire process had seemed like overblown intrigue, uselessly paranoid, something out of a spy movie. Pacific Bank & Trust had what they'd wanted. There was no longer any reason to harass Salih. In the letter that was still on her desk, she had written that she understood Salih's misgivings, but that doing nothing was impossible for her, simply because of who she was. Yes, she had made a promise, but that was before everything had happened, and now circumstances were different. She and her partner were professionals, she said, and his apprehension was thoroughly misplaced.

The doorbell rang. Amelia jumped as if she'd been defibrillated. She looked out the window.

The car was empty.

Amelia went over to the desk. Before answering the door, she pushed the letter off the desk and into the trash.